



Commissioners Weigh Solar Setback Standards with Focus on Protecting Landowners

Posted on October 7, 2025 by Carey Fauscett-Anderson

TRENTON, Ga. (October 7, 2025) — The Dade County Board of Commissioners held an in-depth discussion during its October workshop regarding potential setback and buffering standards for commercial solar fields. The conversation centered on how to protect landowners while balancing private property rights and the county's growing interest in renewable energy development.

Chairman Don Townsend opened the discussion by explaining that the topic stemmed from citizen concerns about large solar developments being placed near residential areas. "While individual homeowners can install rooftop systems with no issues, larger solar operations can affect neighboring landowners," Townsend said. "Our job is to look at ways to provide clear protections for those citizens."

Local resident and Regional Director for the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Stephen Bontekoe addressed the board to provide technical insight. He explained that, because Dade County does not have zoning regulations, any framework for commercial solar development must come through specific, stand-alone ordinances. He said other Georgia counties without zoning have adopted such measures to guide siting, setbacks, and stormwater management for large installations.



"Solar energy is a good thing," Bontekoe said. "But when large solar fields are built on sloped ground, you change how rainwater moves. In Dade County, that can mean concentrated runoff, gully erosion, and drainage problems for your neighbor downstream. Setbacks, vegetative buffers, and basic stormwater standards are simple tools to protect landowners while still allowing solar development."

He emphasized that the discussion is not simply about aesthetics. "It's not just about the view," he said. "Yes, solar fields can change the scenery, but the real concern is what happens beneath the panels. If water runs off too quickly, it causes erosion and flooding downstream. Proper setbacks and drainage planning prevent that."



Bontekoe also noted that Dade County's affordability and low taxes make it particularly attractive to outside developers. "We have some of the cheapest land and lowest taxes in northwest Georgia," he said. "That can be a blessing, but it also means industries and developers look to Dade County as a cost-effective place to build." He warned that without clear, proactive standards, Dade could

face the kind of unplanned growth that reshaped other rural communities. "If we don't do something now, we'll end up like Cherokee County," he said. "They used to be rural farmland too, and then growth came fast. They had to react instead of prepare. Once that happens, it's hard to reverse. The point is, development is coming. We can either prepare for it thoughtfully or face the consequences later."

He acknowledged the difficulty of balancing progress and preservation. "This commission has really hard things to think about," Bontekoe said. "But this is the kind of leadership moment where thoughtful planning can make all the difference for the next generation."

Bontekoe added that commercial-scale solar installations would typically qualify as industrial land use, meaning they would ordinarily go before the county's Industrial Land Use Board for review. However, because Dade County does not have zoning, that board's authority is limited when it comes to setting site-specific requirements such as setbacks, drainage controls, or screening. A local ordinance, he said, could help fill that gap and ensure fairness and environmental protection.

Commissioner Bob Woods spoke from experience, noting that he has worked in both agriculture and solar energy. "If you're in the chicken business, you already have setback rules—250 or 500 feet, depending on where you are," Woods said. "It's about being a good neighbor. The same concept applies here." He also urged caution when dealing with solar developers. "We had one company that disappeared after just a few years," he said. "Before anyone jumps into it, they need to make sure the business is stable and well-established. That's another way we protect landowners."

Commissioner Bill Pullen raised questions about how the Industrial Land Use Board and the Board of Commissioners would coordinate on such projects, noting that local conditions like slope and soil type vary widely across the county. Commissioner Phillip Hartline added that setbacks alone may not be enough, suggesting that vegetative screening should be included in any future standard. "A thirty-foot setback planted in trees can do more than a fifty-foot strip of grass," Hartline said. Commissioner Melissa Bradford supported continued research and asked

that the university study Bontekoe referenced—prepared by the University of Georgia, Georgia Tech, and Emory University—be shared with the commission for review. “Let’s manage what we’ve got in a way that keeps neighbors protected,” Bradford said.

The discussion also included examples of solar farms in other regions and how unregulated runoff on steep slopes can quickly lead to erosion. Bontekoe noted that while some solar sites use livestock grazing to maintain vegetation under panels, runoff control still depends on careful design and site preparation. “Wherever there’s three-phase power, solar becomes viable,” he said. “That’s why Dade County needs to plan ahead.”

Chairman Townsend thanked Bontekoe for his professional perspective and for offering to share best-practice materials. “This isn’t about restricting renewable energy,” Townsend said. “It’s about protecting Dade County landowners and our natural resources with common-sense rules.”

No formal action was taken during the meeting, but commissioners agreed to continue studying the issue and review examples from other Georgia counties as they consider setback distances, buffering, and drainage standards tailored to Dade County’s geography.

Townsend thanked Bontekoe for his presentation and the depth of his insight. “This isn’t about restricting renewable energy,” Townsend said. “It’s about protecting Dade County landowners and our natural resources with common-sense rules.”

No action was taken during the meeting. Commissioners agreed to continue studying the issue, review examples from other counties, and consider setback distances, buffers, and drainage standards tailored to Dade County’s geography.

